Abu al-Hasan Ali Ibn Muhammad Ibn Mahdi al-Tabari (d.380AH approx) was the student of Abu al-Hasan al-Ashari (d.324AH).
A look into his work 'Ta'wil al-ayat al-mushkila':

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1. Intro

This work is considered the only existing book belonging to any of the direct students of Abu al-Hasan al-Ashari that has been published.

The full name on the manuscript is ‘Ta’wil al-ayat al-mushkila al-muwaddaha wa-bayanuha bi-al-hujaj wa-al-burhan ta’lif.
Which translates to: ‘Interpretation of the Problematic and Clarifying Verses, Explained with Proofs and Evidence’.

It’s subject matter actually deals with both the ambiguous Quranic verses and hadiths, hence why some called the book ‘Ta’wil al-ayat al-mushkila’ and others such as Ibn Asakir (d.571AH) referred to it as ‘Ta’wilan al-Ahadith al-Mushkilat’.
[See Ibn Asakir’s ‘Tabyin’, p.195, Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi - Beirut Edition].

The author, Abu al-Hasan al-Tabari writes in his introduction:

“As for what follows: you wrote to me a complaint about what had spread in the region regarding the tashbih
(anthropomorphism) of the group claiming adherence to hadith, who falsify the reports, until they leaned toward some of the weak Muslims and their minor errors, through deception and misrepresentation…

…They proceed to anthropomorphize Allah, glorified and exalted, misled by words they find in the hadith, without understanding their correct application, distinction, or what must be done with them. Then they seek favor with the masses and the unlearned among the people of hadith.”

As a first generation Ashari work, it precedes the important second generation works of the likes of Abu Bakr Al Baqillani (d.403AH) and Ibn Furak (d.406AH).
The latter (Ibn Furak), himself followed up Abu al-Hasan al-Tabari, with his own famous work titled ‘‘Mushkil Al Hadith wa Bayanuhu’.

2. The Manuscript and it's transmission:

The manuscript is a handwritten copy preserved in the Egyptian National Library.

The chain of the manuscript is as follows:

"The venerable learned jurist Shaykh Abu al-Abbas Ahmad Ibn al-Hasan al-Sharwani narrated to us - it was read to him- in the month of Muharram, in the year 478 AH.
He said: The judge, the Imam Abu Layla Muhammad Ibn Bandar al-Basri al-Tabari narrated to us in the blessed month of Ramadan, in the year 464 AH. He said: Abu Ahmad al-Saffari narrated to me. He said: The Shaykh, the Imam Abu al-Husayn Ali Ibn Muhammad Ibn al-Mahdi al-Tabari narrated to us…"

[See p.53 of Dar al-Afaq al-'Arabiyyah - Cairo Edition]

Note there is a typo in the name, as it should be Imam Abu al-Hasan (instead of Husayn) Ali Ibn Muhammad Ibn al-Mahdi al-Tabari.

This is also noted by the editor Nasir Muhammadi Muhammad Jad.

Unfortunately the editor does not address the tahqiq of the transmitters in the chain.

It's likely the original copyist is the one who read it in 478AH, since if the copyist was another person after him then we would expect him to name the one who narrates where it says "The venerable learned jurist Shaykh Abu al-Abbas Ahmad Ibn al-Hasan al-Sharwani narrated to us - it was read to him - in the month of Muharram, in the year 478 AH."

Hence we can assume the unnamed narrator is the original copyist and date it to 478AH.

As for the chain of transmission, Abu al-Abbas Ahmad Ibn al-Hasan al-Sharwani is likely to be Abu al-Abbas Ahmad Ibn al-Hasan Ibn Ahmad, known as 'Najuka'.

Abu Masud al-Hajji Ibn Abi al-Wafa (d.566 AH) mentions:

"Abu al-Abbas Ahmad Ibn al-Hasan Ibn Ahmad, known as 'Najuka', died on the night of Friday, the ninth of Shawwal, in the year 509 AH."

[Abu Masud al-Hajji Ibn Abi al-Wafa's 'Juz fihi wafayat jamaat min al-muhaddithin', p.34, Dar al-Hijrah Edition]

This is supported by the fact that Ibn Asakir, who mentioned this book 'Ta'wilan al-Ahadith al-Mushkilat' of Abu al-Hasan al-Tabari, has narrations via ijaza from Abu al-Abbas Ahmad Ibn al-Hasan Ibn Ahmad.

Ibn Asakir says:

"Ahmad Ibn al-Hasan Ibn Ahmad Ibn Muhammad, Abu al-Abbas Ibn Abi al-Qasim, known as 'Najuka' al-Isfahani, informed us by ijaza, from Abu Nu'aym Ahmad Ibn Abd Allah Ibn Ahmad al-Hafiz…"

[Ibn Asakir's 'Muʿjam al-Shuyukh' 1/23 Dar al-Bashir - Damascus Edition]

As for the Judge Abu Layla Muhammad ibn Bandar al-Basri al-Tabari, he is likely the one mentioned in Taj al-Din al-Subki's 'Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyya al-Kubra'.
In the entry of Sha'ban Ibn al-Hajj al-Mu'adhdhin Abu al-Fadl 'from the people of Sharwan' (d.494AH) it says:"Ibn al-Sam'ani said: He was a virtuous and ascetic imam who studied jurisprudence in Amul, Tabaristan, under the judge Abu Layla Bandar Ibn Muhammad al-Basri"

[Taj al-Din al-Subki's 'Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyya al-Kubra' 5/10 Hijr Printing, Publishing and Distribution Edition]

As for the narrator Abu Ahmad al-Saffari, he is likely to be Abu Ahmad al-Saffar al-Marwazi.

Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Sarifini (d.641AH) mentions:

“Sahl Ibn Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Ibn Sahl, Abu Ahmad al-Saffar al-Marwazi, a virtuous man, arrived in Nishapur as a pilgrim in the year 409 AH and narrated from Abu al-Abbas al-Ma’dani, Abu Sakhr Muhammad Ibn Malik al-Sa’di, Abu al-Fadl Muhammad Ibn al-Husayn al-Qadi, Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Ahmad al-Nasafi, and others.
Ahmad Ibn Abi Sahl Ibn Ali al-Muqri’ narrated from him.”

[Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Sarifini’s ‘Selections from Abu al-Hasan al-Farisi’s (d.529) Al-Siyaq li Tarikh Nishapur’ p.261 Dar al-Fikr - Beirut Edition]

3. Some key parts of the content of the book:

3.1 Denying corporeality for the creator:

The author says:

“Some of the theologians narrated to us that a man from the Jahmiyya, who claimed that his deity is nothing, that it does not exist, is not knowing, and is not powerful, debated with a man from the Mushabbiha, who claimed that Allah is a body, with an eye, a hand, a heart, an ear, and a foot. They argued extensively, until one of them said:
‘Only a Bedouin coming from the desert, free of all sectarian affiliations, can settle this matter between us.’
So they went to a place near Basra, to a man known as al-Murabid. While they were engaged in their debate, a Bedouin happened to pass by, and they presented both doctrines to him.
He said to the Jahmi:
‘As for you, you worship a nonexistent deity.’
And he said to the other: ‘As for you, you worship a human being like yourself.’

By my life, the Bedouin succeeded in correcting both of them, because they had strayed from the truth.”

[p.70]

3.2 His tawil of the ‘eye’ of Allah:

The author says:

“The Mushabbiha also tried to prove that Allah has an eye by citing His words in the story of Nuh’s (Noah’s) Ark:
‘It sails by Our eyes,’ and by His words: ‘and to be done under My eye.’

The response to this is to explain that in Arabic, the word ‘eye’ (ayn) has several meanings:
- It can mean a spring of water.
- It can mean a valuable object or wealth.
- It can mean money or currency.
- It can mean a spy or watcher; for example, when someone is called ‘the eye of the thieves,’it means he is their spy.
- It can also mean attention or care; for example, if someone tells another, ‘Keep your eye on me,’ it means ‘pay attention to what I say.’ Similarly, if someone places something with another and says, ‘Keep your eye on my property,’ it means ‘protect and guard it.’

Thus, when Allah says, ‘It sails by Our eyes,’ it means ‘by Our protection and observation,’ in the sense that its location is not hidden from us.

Likewise, ‘to be done under My eye’ means ‘under My protection and care.’

This is better than saying Allah has an eye, because the eye as an instrument is created; even a human who closes their eyelids cannot see, so how could a created organ fully perceive what is to come?
They also tried to argue that Allah has an eye based on the Prophet’s ﷺ statement about the Dajjal:
‘Your Lord is not one-eyed.’

They said this implies Allah must have an eye.
The response is that being one-eyed is a defect or deficiency, and the Eternal is free of all defects. Therefore, Allah's vision is perfect and suitable for Him, not a physical eye or organ, because the opposite of one-eyed (having a defect in vision) is proper vision, not a created eye, which can fail to perceive.
This is clear for those who reflect and listen attentively."

[p71-72]

3.3 Explanation of 'All things are in the hands of Allah':

The author says:

"Know that they said this to indicate His power over everything and His encompassing knowledge of all things. Similarly, the meaning of 'before Him' in the language can be understood as in common expressions: 'I am before you,' 'I am in front of you,' or 'in your hands.'
They intend to convey that no one can escape His power.

Al-Nabigha al-Dhubyani said:
'I swore and left no doubt for yourself,
And there is no refuge from God for a person.'

The meaning is that the creation has no escape or refuge except with Him.

It does not mean that there is literally a 'behind' Allah to which people could flee.

[p.92]

3.4 Explanation of "The day when the shin will be uncovered"
And His saying, Glory be to Him: "I have not neglected in the side of Allah":

The author says:

"The anthropomorphists claimed that Allah, Glory be to Him, will reveal His shin on the Day of Resurrection, with hairs on it, and they used this verse carelessly without interpreting it.

The interpretation of His saying 'the shin will be uncovered' is:
the severity of the matter.

Similarly, Qatada said this, and Ibrahim al-Nakha'i said: it refers to a great matter.

The poet said:
'My hem of the garment is like a half-uncovered shin,
Patient in clarity, the top of the spear.'

And al-Hudhali said:
'When I raced, I pulled up my garment so that the shin would be exposed.'

As for His saying, Glory be to Him:
'I have not neglected in the side of Allah', the linguists said it means:
I have not neglected obedience to Allah and His command, because negligence only occurs in such matters.

The side (janb) associated with limbs cannot experience negligence, so how could it be said of the Eternal One what cannot occur in Him?

Glory be to Allah above what the wrongdoers claim.

Tha'lab reported that in the term janb it means 'my matter', as in his verse:
'My companion, suffice and remember God in my side (i.e., my matter).
And the war stood on the shin.'
Meaning: intensity.

The origin of this is that when a man faces a great matter requiring effort, he rolls up his garment to expose the shin, so the shin became metaphorically associated with a situation of intensity. Duraid Ibn al-Simma used it in elegy for a man."

[p.94-96]

3.5 Explanation of
'The Most Merciful established Himself above the Throne':

The author says:

"Know, may Allah protect us and you from deviation, that Allah, exalted is He, is in the heavens, above everything, established on His Throne. This means He is high above it…

.. The Eternal, Glorious is He, is high above His Throne, neither sitting nor standing, not in contact with it, nor separate from it…

…Regarding raising hands in prayer: we lift our hands toward the heavens not because Allah's presence is limited to the sky, but because His Throne is established above, as a point of reference for our devotion.
His creation and the angels occupy the earth; His knowledge encompasses all places, but that does not equate to Him being contained in them…

…The text emphasizes that all attributions of Allah being in specific places or 'everywhere' must be understood in terms of knowledge, power, and control, not physical containment.
Similarly, expressions in Arabic like *"X is in his house"* or *"X is praying"* indicate action and attention, not literal spatial confinement.

Finally, the raising of hands toward the Throne signifies directing prayer and intention toward Allah, not a belief that His presence is limited to a specific point.
This reconciles Quranic language with the understanding that Allah is beyond physical constraints.

[p.144-150]

3.6 Explanation of the Reports Narrated from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ on their outward and inner:

The author said:

"And their apparent meaning seems anthropomorphic, while their inner meaning is otherwise…

..Authentic reports that have been transmitted reliably and widely, whose apparent meaning seems anthropomorphic, but whose inner meaning is otherwise.
With our effort, ability, and the extent of our knowledge, we seek Allah's help, relying on Him and holding fast to Him, to begin interpreting them, clarifying their meanings, and negating any anthropomorphism in them, hoping that Allah, Glorified is He, will grant us closeness through this and reward us with His favor.
He is the strongest helper and the best guide."

[p.151]

3.7 Explanation of the report of the 'Image':

The author says:

"Allah, Glorified and Exalted, cannot have a form or an image, because a form implies a maker, and an image implies a modeled thing.
Allah, Exalted, is the Creator of all forms and images, so how could He Himself have a form or image, while He is: *'There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the All-Hearing, All-Seeing"*?

Scholars have differed in interpreting this hadith in several ways:

1. Some say that Allah created Adam in His (Adam's) form
2. Others say that the hadith means Adam was created in the image of the face. They cited reports that the Prophet ﷺ passed by a man hitting another on the face, and he said: 'Do not hit him, for Allah created Adam in the image of this person's face.'
3. Others interpret it as a correction of the belief that Adam in Paradise had a different form than in this world. The Prophet ﷺ clarified: 'Allah created Adam in the form he had in Paradise, similar to the form he had in this world.'

Some deviants, after hearing these correct interpretations that deny anthropomorphism, added incorrectly to the hadith, saying:
'Allah created Adam in the image of the Most Merciful,' trying to imply that the pronoun in 'His image' refers to Allah. This is linguistically impossible, and clearly erroneous. Allah did not say: 'The Most Merciful created the heavens by His will,' and likewise, the hadith should not be interpreted in such a manner."

[p.152-154]

3.8 Explaining the laughter of Allah:

The author said:

"Laughing by Allah by baring the teeth or opening the mouth is impossible and impermissible; one cannot describe Allah in such a way, because it implies a clear anthropomorphism.
Exalted is He above that!

However, in Arabic, people say 'the earth laughed' when it sprouted, because it shows the beauty of the vegetation and flowers opening, similar to how a smiling person reveals their teeth.
Likewise, when the palm's shoots open and the whitish part appears, it is called 'laughing,' because to the observer it looks like the opening of the teeth.
One also says 'the shoot laughed' when what was hidden within becomes visible.

The poet said:
'And the cloud laughed with it, then cried'
Here, 'laughing' refers to the display of lightning, and 'crying' refers to the rain.

Ibn al-Anbari composed:
'Do you not see the earth has given you its flowers,
Green and clothed with light?
The sky cries in its corners,
And spring smiles in its areas.'
Here, 'smiling' means the vegetation appearing and the light rising upon it.

Another poet said:
'Every day with a new chrysanthemum
The meadow laughs from the crying of the sky'

Again, 'laughing' indicates growth and appearance, and "crying" refers to the rain descending from the sky.

Ibn al-A'rabi noted that Arabs also say 'this path laughs,' meaning it is clear and visible.
So in all these expressions, 'laughing' refers to clarity, visibility, or manifestation.

Meaning of the report, Allah knows best:

When it says 'Allah laughed,' it means Allah displayed the reward for these two men who were killed, one killed his companion, then was himself killed after repentance, that they have Paradise.

Similarly, the report from the Commander of the Faithful that the Prophet ﷺ said:
'I laughed at my Lord's laughter' means he rejoiced at Allah's manifestation of reward for the one who spoke the righteous statement.

Summary: 'Laughing' applied to Allah is metaphorical, meaning *to display, manifest, or make clear the result or reward*, not a literal laughter."

So when we find a valid meaning of 'laughing' as understood by the Arabs in their language, other than baring the teeth in amazement, then applying this meaning to our Lord, Exalted is He, is more appropriate than what the anthropomorphists ascribed to Him.

[p.156-159]

3.9 Explanation of 'the believer draws near to his lord':

The author says:

"The phrase *'the servant draws near'* means that he comes close to Allah's generosity and favor, just as one says about a person: 'He is close to the ruler,' meaning he enjoys honor, privilege, and acceptance from him.
It does not refer to physical proximity.

The phrase *'until He places His kanf over him*' means His care, mercy, compassion, attention, and protection.

In Arabic, one says:
'I am in the kanf of so-and-so,'
meaning under his care, protection, and observation.

Some of the anthropomorphists transmitted this hadith incorrectly as *'until He places His shoulder on him'*, which is a distortion that implies literal resemblance.
Exalted is Allah above that.

[p.171]

3.10 Explanation of "Between Allah and creation are seventy thousand veils of light and darkness':

The author said:

"The phrase *'between Allah are seventy thousand veils*' means that there are seventy thousand veils between Allah and His creation, not for Allah Himself. The creation is veiled from Him, not that Allah is limited or veiled, for the veiled one implies restriction and limitation. Exalted is Allah above that.

If the meaning of the hadith is understood this way, and the veils are seen as separating creation from knowledge of Allah's essence, then there is no implication of anthropomorphism or similarity to creation in its narration.
All praise is due to Allah alone."

[p.183]

3.11 Explanation of "Hell will not be filled until the Compeller places His foot in it, and it will say: 'Enough! Enough!":

The author says:

"Know, may Allah grant you understanding and goodness, that some scholars of insight claimed that the 'foot' here refers to precedence or priority of those among the disbelievers and the wicked, not a literal foot or limb.

This is because the Eternal (Al-Qadeem) is not described with limbs, as Allah says: *'There is nothing like unto Him*' (Quran 42:11).

Every person who precedes others in good or evil is considered 'preceding' (qadam) among the Arabs.

For example, Allah says: *'and send blessings upon them all…*' meaning precedence in truth.

They also say of a person:
'He has qadam in Islam" or "qadam in ignorance (pre-Islamic times),' meaning precedence and honor.

Ibn al-A'rabi said:
''Qadam' refers to someone advanced in honor.
'Al-Qadam' refers to the ancient or the prior, even if there is no honor involved.'

Waddah al-Yamani said:
'Once you understand qadam in this sense, there is no reason to interpret it as implying any literal limb or anthropomorphism — glory be to Allah!'

Another example in poetry:
'Pray to your Lord and take qadam, it will save you on the day of stumbling and slip', meaning precedence in virtue.

Another verse:
'It was established with a foot of honor, its genealogies were cut off by the barber', meaning precedence in dignity or rank.

Al-Nadr ibn Shumail, may Allah have mercy on him, claimed that the meaning of the Prophet's ﷺ statement *'until the Compeller places His foot in it*' is:

‘referring to those whose status in knowledge is determined to be among the inhabitants of Hell — not a literal foot.’”

[p.186-188]

3.12 Explanation of "The Throne shook at the death of Sa’d ibn Mu’adh”:

The author says:

“People differed in the interpretation of this report:
Some claimed that the ‘Throne’ here refers to the Throne of Allah and that it literally moved at Sa’d’s death.

This is incorrect, because it is impossible for the Throne of the Merciful to move due to anyone’s death or life.
Just as the sun does not eclipse at the death of anyone, how could the Throne move?
If it did, the movement of the Throne would disturb the sun and shake the earth.

Others claimed that the Throne here refers to the bed on which Sa’d lay.
This is also an invalid interpretation, because if it were a bed, it would not give Sa’d any special virtue, nor would the report carry any significance; beds of the deceased naturally move when people handle them.

The correct interpretation is that the ‘shaking’ refers to **joy, gladness, or delight**.

In Arabic, it is said that someone ‘shakes’ for good deeds, meaning they are happy or pleased.
A person may be ‘shaken’ by praise, meaning comforted or uplifted. For example, if someone is invited to eat, they are “shaken”, meaning they rejoice and delight, and if asked about a need, they ‘shake’, meaning they are pleased or relieved.

As Ibn al-Anbari narrated from Tha’lab al-Nahwi in poetry:
‘As the moist crops shook beneath the breeze, and noble deeds bring a gentle shake’, meaning that ‘shaking’ represents delight and happiness.

Thus, in this hadith, the “shaking” of the Throne refers to the joy and delight of the angels who carry the Throne upon receiving the soul of Sa’d, in recognition of his virtue, his good deeds, and his honorable character.
The Throne itself does not physically move; rather, the angels rejoice at the coming of a noble soul.

It is similar to what the Prophet ﷺ said: *‘This mountain loves us,’* meaning the people of the mountain (the Ansar) are beloved, and it is a metaphorical expression of joy.
Additionally, it is narrated that angels rejoice at the arrival of a believer’s soul, and that each believer has a gate in the heavens through which their deeds ascend, their provision descends, and their soul rises after death.
The Throne shaking here signifies the angels joy and gladness at the coming of Sa’d’s soul, due to his merit, noble character, and righteous deeds.”

[p.210-213]

3.13 Explanation of "I saw my lord in the most beautiful form":

The author said:

"His statement: 'I saw my Lord', may He be glorified, refers to **a vision in a dream**.
Seeing Allah in a dream is considered permissible by the majority of the Mu'tazilites and affirmers of divine attributes.
Some Mu'tazilite scholars claimed that some people denied seeing Allah in a dream because it is not possible to depict Him physically.
However, such denial has no valid basis, because seeing Him in a dream does not necessitate giving Him a physical form.
The term 'seeing' is used metaphorically for humans to indicate perception in the mind.

His statement: 'In the best form', meaning, according to Allah's knowledge, that the vision appeared to the Prophet ﷺ in the best possible form, so the imagery is applied to the Prophet, not to the Eternal (Al-Qadeem).

His statement: 'And He placed His hand between my shoulders' refers metaphorically to **placing** His grace, favor, and mercy between the Prophet's ﷺ shoulders, in accordance with the Arabic usage of calling a blessing or good effect a 'hand' (kafa).

His statement: 'And I felt its coolness' means feeling the effect and impact of the blessing, its knowledge, and its benefit.

It is narrated from Thawban that he said: the Prophet ﷺ said: *'*
He placed His hand between my shoulders until I felt the coolness of His fingers on my chest.'
This means, according to Allah's knowledge, that the Prophet ﷺ perceived the effects of Allah's goodness, favor, mercy, and blessing within his heart.
At that moment, he witnessed a reflection of Allah's mercy and the scope of His benevolence in all creation.

The proper understanding is to attribute this meaning to the Prophet ﷺ, not to Allah Himself, because ascribing literal physical attributes to the Eternal would be inappropriate and would lead to anthropomorphism.
Glory be to Allah above that!"

[p.219]

3.14 Explanation of "on the right hand of the Most Merciful":

The author said:

"It has been said that the meaning of His statement 'on the right hand of the Most Merciful' refers to a high station and a distinguished rank.
The Arabs say: *'So-and-so is at our right*' to indicate his honor, prestige, and elevated position.

For example, the poet said:

'I say to my she-camel when it reached me: You have become at my right', meaning it has reached a noble or honored position."

[p.229]

3.15 Explanation of “both His hands are right”

The author said:

“This signifies completeness and perfection, because in everything, the left is seen as lesser than the right in strength, power, and perfection.
Arabs traditionally preferred the right hand and disliked the left, because the left was associated with deficiency and the right with perfection.
They say of someone extremely generous, virtuous, or noble:
‘Both his hands are right’.

If a person’s share or fortune is deficient, they say: *‘His arrow is in the left’*.

If he neither gains benefit nor prevents harm, they say: *‘He is neither right nor left’*.

The poet Al-Farazdaq said:
‘Both His hands are right, never failing,
Giving death, glory, and rain.’

It is also narrated in another report:
‘The right hand of Allah is vast; nothing can diminish it day or night.’

This means **the bounty and generosity of Allah are immense and inexhaustible**. The poet Al-Murar alluded to this same meaning.”

[Ibid]